

# Nonstate Security Threats in Africa Challenges for U.S. Engagement

BY ANDRE LE SAGE

**T**his article provides an overview of Africa's irregular, nonstate threats, followed by an analysis of their strategic implications for regional peace and stability, as well as the national security interests of the United States. After reviewing the elements of the emerging international consensus on how best to address these threats, the conclusion highlights a number of new and innovative tools that can be used to build political will on the continent to confront these security challenges. This article is intended as a background analysis for those who are new to the African continent, as well as a source of detailed information on emerging threats that receive too little public or policy-level attention.

## **Criminal Warfare**

Any survey of irregular, nonstate threats in Africa must confront the diverse and complex nature of armed conflict on the continent. Militias and nonstatutory forces are fielded by both insurgents and governments. Civil wars across the continent are waged most commonly by tribally based militias. Many governments have responded by fielding their own tribal militias as proxies (as with the Janjaweed in Darfur), deploying their own militaries (which are no less tribally based or predatory), or conducting brutal counterinsurgency operations to suppress rebels and their civilian support base. In this context, the 1998 Ethiopia-Eritrea border war is one of only a few recent instances of conventional interstate conflict on the continent.

Africa's civil wars have become known for their brutality, as well as their complex organization around overlapping ethnic, regional, and religious lines and ever-splintering factions.<sup>1</sup> Given the ethnic basis of militia mobilization, the targeting of civilians has sadly come to “make sense” in

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African conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Civilians are viewed as the support base of both governments and antigovernment rebellions. Moreover, they are also a source of enrichment by “primitive accumulation” through the stripping of assets.<sup>3</sup> Rebels target pro-government civilians as a means of claiming wealth (in the form of property, land, cattle, and so forth) that the rebels deem to be the ill-gotten gains of a corrupt regime acting in an adversary ethnic group’s favor. Conversely, pro-government forces target civilians in a strategy of “collective punishment,” holding entire ethnic groups accountable for atrocities committed by rebel leaders who purport to represent that group. Ethnic cleansing is used to seize land presently occupied by other groups, to ensure access to valuable resources contained within that land, or to prevent civilians in that group from casting ballots in elections.

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War economies emerge that sustain African conflicts for long durations and generate vested interests in continued instability.<sup>4</sup> This is generally when warlordism emerges: “winning” a conflict is not essential when a local strongman can sufficiently benefit from the perpetuation of a crisis to finance his militia and remain the central political figure in his personal area of control. Militia-factions that originally had a political program or coherent set of grievances may see those diminish as core motivations to continue fighting. In short, the goals of conflict shift from a process of political competition to one of plunder. Given the wide range of resources

available to exploit—by stripping assets from civilian populations, trading in gemstones and strategic resources such as oil, tin, or coltan, and extorting “taxes” on aid and trade at key points in a country’s infrastructure (markets, airports, seaports, key road junctions)—African conflicts can become self-financing, and are unlikely to “burn themselves out” in the sense of a forest fire.

Insecurity and criminality tend to linger even when peace settlements are achieved. At the top levels of postwar governments, commanders and officials who were involved in criminal networks to sustain their militias continue to enrich themselves using the same practices in peacetime. For the rank and file, militia activity remains the primary source of livelihood for many former combatants. The failure to effectively disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate militia fighters can result in roving bands of highwaymen who prey on villagers and their transport networks, as has been the case from Cameroon to the Central African Republic. Fighters may also offer their services as mercenaries in other countries, or simply serve as a pool of armed talent for a future outbreak of conflict in their homeland.

Commodity smuggling, often involving forgery and low-quality products, is a lucrative market deeply tied to African civil wars. From the trade in “blood diamonds” to the smuggling of cigarettes and counterfeit pharmaceuticals, corruption and conflict have turned much of Africa into a “duty free” port for organized crime. In a recent study of transnational trafficking flows in West Africa, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) placed the annual value of the trade in fake and low-quality anti-malarial drugs at \$438 million, while cigarette smuggling from the Gulf of Guinea to North Africa and Europe

is worth approximately \$775 million per year.<sup>5</sup> Without considering other contraband items or other regions of the continent, those sums already match the value of West Africa's annual trade in cocaine.

Conflict is also linked to environmental crimes in Africa. Examples include plundering the forestry sector through illegal logging, forest encroachment via the illegal privatization of public lands, and charcoal-making for domestic and commercial fuel supplies.<sup>6</sup> While these activities can sustain criminal organizations or militias, they can also drive internal displacement and communal antagonisms, resulting in future political crises.<sup>7</sup>

Weapons proliferation has fueled Africa's civil wars and communal conflicts, and made armed criminality far more deadly. The trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW), often in violation of international embargoes, has replenished stocks from the Cold War, when weapons and ammunition flooded into Africa from the United States and Soviet Union. Today, the UN estimates that 100 million SALW illegally circulate in Africa—20 percent of the global total.<sup>8</sup> While AK-47s have been dubbed the ultimate “weapons of mass destruction” on the continent, heavier assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades are an equal menace. Concerns have grown over the potential for terrorists to acquire sophisticated surface-to-air missiles in Africa, as well as mortars, landmines, grenades, and improvised explosive devices made from commercial components.

The arms trade in Africa has been fueled in many ways and by many groups. First, as part of cross-border proxy wars, African governments often covertly supply weapons and ammunition to rebel groups in nearby countries. Neighboring states with ethnic brethren

or financial interests across their national borders intervene in each others' crises with stark regularity. Regional conflict systems emerge where neighboring states back each others' rebels with arms transfers, rear bases, and occasional direct military support. As a result, conflicts spread, parties to the conflicts multiply, and the wars are far more difficult to mediate. Second, foreign arms dealers from Eastern Europe such as Victor Bout play an

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active role,<sup>9</sup> but another more prosaic vector of proliferation is the simple diversion of weapons and ammunition from African government stockpiles for sale on the regional markets. High-level officials are often involved, employing fake bills of lading and end user certificates to disguise the eventual destination of military equipment.<sup>10</sup> Finally, as a result of the accessibility and volume of foreign supplies, major internal markets have emerged where rebels, criminals, and terrorists can access weapons, ammunition, and explosives. This has led to a catastrophic rise in violent deaths in local communal conflicts over land and water, or the traditional practice of cattle rustling.<sup>11</sup>

## Terrorism

Africa is now a significant front in global efforts to combat terrorism.<sup>12</sup> Sudan was Osama bin Laden's base of operations from 1992 to 1996, during which time he first endeavored to bring African Islamists under a common banner of global jihad. While this effort did not succeed, bin Laden began operational planning there for the successful 1998 attacks on

U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Operatives from those attacks fled to Somalia, but returned to Kenya in 2002 with a successful suicide vehicle bombing of the Paradise Hotel near Mombasa and a failed surface-to-air missile attack on an Israeli charter airliner departing that city's airport.

From its leaders' statements and publications, al Qaeda's priorities in Africa are clear: they desire to "liberate" African Muslim populations from what al Qaeda deems to be "apostate" regimes; oppose international peacekeeping efforts in Muslim countries, notably Somalia and Sudan; destabilize oil-producing areas, particularly Nigeria, in order to harm the global economy; and target governments with close political ties to the West. To do so, al Qaeda has not based its primary leaders or principal training camps on the continent. Rather, it has built cooperative ties with African Islamist militants, including the al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) franchise based in Algeria and northern Mali, and the Harakat al-Shabab network based in southern Somalia.<sup>13</sup>

In North and West Africa, AQIM is the primary terrorist threat. Emanating from Algeria's decade-long conflict with Islamists in the 1990s, AQIM is the only significant militia force remaining from that struggle. It was created when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) pledged allegiance to al Qaeda's senior leadership in January 2007. In December of that year, the group conducted simultaneous bombings in Algiers of the UN office complex and the Constitutional Court—a symbol of AQIM's new dual agenda of attacking both Algerian national and global jihadi targets. AQIM aspires to become a transnational movement across the Maghreb and Sahel areas, encompassing the militants and communities who were loyal to

first-generation Islamist militant groups in the area, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Moroccan Islamic Combat Group, Tunisian Islamic Front, Mauritanian Group for Preaching and Jihad, and others. These groups were effectively suppressed by North African governments, but the roots of extremism in the region, including poverty, political marginalization, and social alienation, have never been fully addressed. As a result, new waves of recruitment for jihad are plausible.<sup>14</sup>

AQIM does not pose an immediate threat to Algeria's political stability, and successful counterinsurgency operations have left the group little choice but to conduct low-level hit-and-run and explosives attacks against government forces. Today, the Sahel is where AQIM poses the most immediate threat to African and Western interests. While parts of northern Mali were a long-time GSPC rear base, smuggling zone, and training area, AQIM's leadership has turned the Sahel into an operational area. Southern Zone emirs leading AQIM battalions, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdel Hamid Abu Zaid, have ordered numerous kidnap operations against Western tourists, diplomats, and aid workers.<sup>15</sup> While most have been released for ransom—a critical means of raising revenue for AQIM's sustainability—one British hostage, Edwin Dyer, was executed in 2009, after the British government failed to respond to AQIM demands for the release of convicted terrorists from British jails.<sup>16</sup> In addition, AQIM has launched a series of attacks in Mauritania, including several confrontations with local security forces, the murder of French tourists in December 2007, a failed assault on the Israeli embassy in February 2008, and the murder of a U.S. aid worker in the capital city in June 2009.



On the other side of the continent, Somalia has long been a rear base for the East Africa al Qaeda (EAAQ) cell responsible for the 1998 and 2002 attacks in Kenya and Tanzania, as well as subsequent failed efforts to attack the new U.S. Embassy in Nairobi and Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, where Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa is based.<sup>17</sup> Immediately after September 11, 2001, the United States designated the Somali Islamist movement known as Al Itihad al Islamia (AIAI) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. That group has splintered since the late 1990s and been replaced by a variety of Islamist militia-factions. The original AIAI leaders, Hassan Dahir Aweis and Hassan al-Turki, joined their forces under the banner of Hizbul Islamia, seeking to establish an Islamist state in Somalia. However, this group is relatively small and

ideologically pragmatic by comparison with Harakat al-Shabab, another AIAI offshoot and the leading insurgent group fighting Somalia's UN-backed Transitional Federal Government. Al-Shabab seeks to establish an Islamist emirate over much of the Horn of Africa, provides direct support for EAAQ, and has brought suicide bombing and improvised explosive device attacks to Somalia's crisis. These cooperative relations have enabled al Qaeda to establish local training camps for foreign fighters and robust facilitation networks on the continent. In the case of al-Shabab, dozens of diaspora Somalis from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and elsewhere have returned to their homeland for jihad, and may be used by al Qaeda to strike in the West.<sup>18</sup>

Other regions of Africa have been less affected by the presence of operational terrorist cells, but some have become hubs for safe havens, transit, recruitment, and financing. In West Africa, there have been concerns that AQIM may link up with the militant Boko Haram group in Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> Also known as the "Nigerian Taliban" or Jama'at Hijra wal Takfir, this group has been responsible for numerous attacks on local police stations and other religious groups in an effort to create a purified Islamist enclave in the northeast of the country. By contrast, in Southern Africa, numerous al Qaeda-linked militants have been captured or killed after transiting the region. This includes Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, who was involved in the 1998 Nairobi bombing and was ultimately captured in Pakistan, and Harun Rashid Aswat, who was implicated in the 2005 London bombings. More recently, the United States designated two members of the well-known Dockrat family in South Africa for financing al Qaeda. There were concerns that any

of these groups might have attacked the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa as a means of generating publicity.<sup>20</sup>

## Piracy and Oil Bunkering

Pirate attacks emanating from Somalia into the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden are a major maritime security threat. Starting roughly in 2004, two networks of pirate militia emerged on the northern Somali coast (at the villages of Eyl and Garad in the Puntland area, and the villages of Harardere and Hobyo in the Mudug region). The pirate attacks are as low-tech as they are brazen. A dozen or so militia, armed with little more than AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, set off from the Somali coast in several 20- to 30-foot skiffs powered by outboard engines. Once they come across a mid-sized vessel such as a foreign fishing trawler, the pirates commandeer it for use as a "mother ship" that will allow them to venture farther out to sea for longer periods.<sup>21</sup> Once a suitable target is found, the pirates swarm the vessel until it can be boarded. The ship is then hijacked back to the Somali coast and the crew is held until a ransom is paid.

The rate of pirate attacks has continued to rise: 214 ships were attacked in 2009, of which 47 were actually seized with 867 crewmembers taken hostage. International Maritime Bureau reporting indicates the rate of annual Somali piracy attacks has nearly doubled since 2008.<sup>22</sup> As international shipping and fishing fleets began to steer clear of Somalia's Indian Ocean coastline, the pirates shifted their operations north to the Gulf of Aden. Since UN-authorized patrols by U.S., European, and Asian navies have been deployed, however, the pirates compensated by launching attacks hundreds of nautical miles offshore—south toward the Mozambique Channel and east toward India.

Ransom payments to pirates were valued at a minimum of \$30 million in 2008 alone—a figure that may have doubled in 2009, given both the increased number of ships hijacked and the growing value of individual ransom payments. This money does not go primarily to the individual pirate militia that seizes a vessel. It is shared among the piracy bosses or syndicate leaders who organized the attack, other investors who sponsor individual operations (including local political leaders or their family members), and local communities that provide security for pirate bases or supply food, water, and other services to the hijackers and crew during the hostage period. In short, piracy has become a cottage industry in Somalia—one that provides a significant income for thousands of people in a country with no functioning central government since the 1980s.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the impact on the lives and families of sailors who are taken hostage, the ransoms generated by Somali piracy are liable to destabilize the relatively peaceful northern regions of Somalia and undermine its nascent authorities, fuel the rise of militias, impede the delivery of humanitarian relief (particularly food aid) to drought- and war-affected populations in the Horn of Africa, and increase the costs of global trade. Finally, there is a concern that terrorist groups operating from Somalia could either profit from piracy themselves in order to finance new adventures, or equip their skiffs with explosives for attacks that resemble those on the USS Cole or the French Limburg tanker off Yemen.

Maritime insecurity is a concern in West Africa as well, and involves several distinct but related threats. Gulf of Guinea countries are estimated to lose 55 million barrels of oil worth over \$1 billion annually to “oil bunkering,” the local term for oil theft.<sup>24</sup> This is significant, as West African oil supplies (mostly sweet crude)

are expected to make up 25 percent of U.S. foreign oil imports by 2015,<sup>25</sup> and militant attacks impacting West African oil already affect the price of oil on global stock markets. The role played by Nigerian militant groups, particularly the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), is well documented in kidnapping foreign oil workers for ransom, exploding oil pipelines when their demands have not been met, and simply siphoning off oil into their own barges for onward, illegal sales to tankers waiting in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>26</sup> By and large, these threats have taken place either on land or in “brown water” areas of the Delta.

Recently, however, these attacks have moved beyond the Niger Delta and become more daring. In June 2008, MEND attacked Shell’s Bonga oil platform 125 nautical miles offshore—a range previously considered untenable for Delta militants—resulting in a halt to 225,000 barrels per day of crude oil output. In September 2008, seaborne militants from Nigeria attacked the town of Limbe, Cameroon, from the sea. They barricaded roads into the town, repelled Cameroonian soldiers, shot up the local prefect’s office, and used explosives to blast their way into banks, seizing large sums of money. In July 2009, before the Nigerian government’s recent amnesty program for Delta militants, MEND launched its first ever attack in the capital city of Lagos to demonstrate the group’s potential to inflict serious harm if government promises are not kept. Rates of outright piracy—targeting foreign ships for looting or hijacking and ransom—have also increased, in a possible sign of the “contagion effect” of successful piracy operations off Somalia.<sup>27</sup>

### Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking has risen significantly in Africa over the past decade, and the continent



Global Post (Paul Ames)



**Somali soldiers use unloaded weapons for firing practice**

has emerged as a major transit hub for narcotics from South America and South Asia to reach Europe and to a lesser extent the United States. In 2007, an estimated 48 metric tons of cocaine valued at \$1.8 billion transited West Africa, comprising some 27 percent of Europe's annual supply.<sup>28</sup> In 2009, several stocks of precursor chemicals were discovered in West Africa, indicating that the region is becoming a hub for stockpiling and refining "base cocaine" into a finished product.<sup>29</sup> On the other side of the continent, some 30–35 metric tons of heroin, as well as a much smaller volume of cocaine, were smuggled through East Africa in 2008.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Southern Africa has become a distribution hub where all forms of narcotics are present, as well as a destination for the synthetic amphetamine known as mandrax (methaqualone).<sup>31</sup> In North Africa, Morocco alone accounted for up to 40 percent of European cannabis supplies in 2003, while that drug is widely produced (and consumed) across much of Africa.<sup>32</sup>

Why does shipping through Africa make sense? The short answer, of course, is that money can be made. While direct routes for smuggling drugs to Western markets from South America or South Asia are well monitored and face high interdiction rates, the transshipment of drugs via Africa originally served to disguise the origins of cargo and avoid inspection. While Western security and border control officials now realize the new pattern of drug flows and have adjusted accordingly, weak law enforcement and high-level corruption (and in some cases direct complicity) make Africa a favorable base of operations. Drug traffickers are often supported by local government intermediaries with close ties to West African security officials and import/export



businesses that can provide protection and logistical support.

Cocaine is imported to Africa from Latin America by aircraft at rural airstrips or dropped by ships for pickup by smaller motorboats. From there, bulk shipments are brought on land and are divided into smaller parcels. These can be sent overland and via coastal routes toward southern Europe, or “shot-gunned” on commercial aircraft using multiple parcels and human “swallowers” or mules. In one infamous operation, Dutch customs officials at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam arrested 32 drug couriers off a single plane.<sup>33</sup> Trafficking organizations have evolved sophisticated, multinational networks for wholesale supply to Europe. While a small number of Latin American nationals connected to known drug trafficking organizations in Colombia and Mexico control the import of cocaine to countries such as Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, they then sell the product to an array of middlemen who organize onward shipments. Within Europe, sales at the street level are coordinated through a range of diaspora, underworld contacts. The result is a multinational and multi-layered network with cutouts and redundancies built in to avoid any one failed shipment being linked back to its originators or disrupting the overall supply chain.<sup>34</sup>

### Other Organized Crime

Human smuggling and trafficking in persons is another ugly form of organized crime in Africa. In the former, individuals seeking to emigrate from Africa willingly pay costly sums to networks of recruiters, transporters, escorts, and suppliers of forged documents in order to be transported abroad, usually to Europe or the Arab Gulf states. In the latter, migrants are unwillingly exploited or sold by their transporters for

forced prostitution, forced labor, or child soldiering. According to UNODC, which values the global trade at nearly \$32 billion per year, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Morocco are known as major generators of individuals to be smuggled and trafficked, while several countries in Eastern and Southern Africa have become transit hubs for human smuggling and trafficking operations that originate in Asia.<sup>35</sup> The smuggling of young men and women, usually labor migrants, across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia to Yemen demonstrates the brutality of this trade. In exchange for \$100 (not an easy sum for destitute Somalis

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to scrape together), smugglers overload fishing skiffs with dozens of individuals. Passengers are at times tied up, beaten, raped, or robbed. If the smugglers confront high seas or a Yemeni coast guard patrol, they will throw their human cargo overboard at the point of a gun. This allows the smugglers to escape, but leaves their passengers to drown if they are tied up or cannot swim to shore. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that some 100 passengers die each month attempting to illegally migrate along this route.<sup>36</sup>

Kidnapping is a longstanding problem in much of Africa that is now taking on new dimensions.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the obvious targeting of wealthy individuals, children make up a growing percentage of victims as parents are more likely to pay ransoms. Foreign businesses, tourists, and aid workers are other key targets for high ransom demands, but lower amounts are

garnered more quickly and more frequently from working-class African victims. Kidnapping is an underreported crime with very low conviction rates because payments to secure the release of victims are often made without involving police. In South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, there are reports that some organized syndicates now specialize in kidnapping, and that it has transformed from a “brutal crime to a smart crime.”<sup>38</sup> Some speculate that declining rates of success in other lucrative forms of armed robbery—due to improved security at banks and increased use of digital means to make financial transfers—have led criminals to focus on kidnapping instead. At times, entire villages or communities are involved in the kidnapping industry, and share the burden of incarcerating and sustaining a hostage in return for a share of the final ransom payment. The crime, mostly undertaken for financial gain, has a political dimension in some prominent cases. Holding hostages for ransom is common practice for

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groups such as MEND in the Niger Delta and AQIM in the Sahel, particularly northern Mali. There, kidnappings serve as a source of income but also are used to highlight political grievances and demand concessions from governments. For instance, AQIM in northern Mali has successfully demanded that its jailed operatives be released from prison in exchange for kidnapped hostages.

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a primary African maritime

security concern. Global annual losses to IUU fishing are estimated at \$10 to \$23 billion, with estimates for sub-Saharan Africa totaling \$1 billion per year. According to UN and British government reports, IUU fishing now represents approximately 15–20 percent of all catches along Africa’s Indian Ocean coast. This is a lucrative business: in Somalia, illegal fishing in tuna and shrimp can net \$94 million per year. In Tanzania, a single long-line fishing operation by Taiwan vessels in 2001 reportedly took in \$21 million in tuna. In South Africa, 500 metric tons of abalone worth \$325 million are illegally caught and shipped to China each year, and involve Chinese triad syndicates.<sup>39</sup> IUU fishing severely impacts food security and economic development in Africa. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 200 million Africans rely on fish for nutrition, 10 million rely on fishing for income, and some coastal nations could increase GNP up to 5 percent with effective fisheries regulation. Instead, Africa’s fisheries resources are being unsustainably plundered by a combination of foreign trawlers, smuggling syndicates, and local fishermen. In addition to not paying taxes or fees, they fish out of season and over-catch quotas, target prohibited species, use outlawed methods such as long-lines, and at times employ poisons and explosives.<sup>40</sup>

Poaching and the trade in endangered species threaten the hard-currency earner of tourism in East Africa. They are having a devastating impact on Africa’s environmental heritage and are even financing some militia in Central Africa’s civil wars.<sup>41</sup> For instance, despite the signing of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora and an internationally agreed trade ban dating from 1989, rising demand for ivory in

East Asia has led to a spike in elephant poaching. In June 2002, Singapore seized 6.2 metric tons of ivory (worth nearly \$1 million) coming from Malawi via South Africa, demonstrating the scale and sophistication of the illegal trade.<sup>42</sup>

Toxic waste dumping has emerged as an additional problem. One notorious case involved the dumping of a deadly cocktail of industrial sludge in an urban area of Côte d'Ivoire, killing some 15 people and sickening over 100,000 with blistering, headaches, nausea, and abdominal pains. Following litigation, the Trafigura oil trading company settled the case with a payment of \$200 million to the government and another \$45 million to 30,000 victims.<sup>43</sup> More recently, in December 2009, the Uranium Mining Company of Franceville came under scrutiny for dumping 2 million tons of radioactive waste in southeast Gabon, which leached into local rivers and showed up in materials used for home construction.<sup>44</sup> Villagers building houses from radioactive rocks reported mild illnesses at that point, but there are fears that exposure will lead to high cancer rates over the long term. The problem of toxic dumping is not confined to Africa's west coast. In East Africa, the fight against toxic dumping has also become a justification that Somali pirates cite for "policing" Indian Ocean waters against foreign shipping.<sup>45</sup>

## Strategic Implications

Why do these dangers matter to the United States and international community? As stated above, Africa's irregular threats are not isolated phenomena. They create a vicious circle of insecurity, the impact of which is primarily borne by African civilians, but which increasingly has a direct impact on U.S. national security. Evolving fears over terrorism and the nature of

U.S. counterterrorism programs in Africa demonstrate this nexus. Following the al Qaeda attacks of 2001, counterterrorism efforts have slowly evolved toward addressing the full range of irregular threats in Africa. Beyond kinetic

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operations attempting to defeat al Qaeda and its associated movements, U.S. concerns grew to encompass the wide range of vulnerabilities that allowed terrorists to penetrate and operate in African countries. These include the existence of safe havens where civil conflict allows terrorists to operate, the potential for rebel movements to find common cause with terrorists and criminals against state authorities, weak border security, and ineffective customs and ports controls. Additional focus has been placed on updating African legal codes, reducing foreign policy tensions that inhibit African cooperation, holding accountable government security services that are often seen as repressive arms of the state rather than guarantors of peace, and ending state complicity in illicit markets that lead to unwillingness to tighten controls.

U.S. interests in combating drug trafficking in Africa have yielded a similar broad set of security concerns that go well beyond targeting individual drug trafficking organizations and their operatives.<sup>46</sup> First, while drug trafficking through Africa is organized primarily to funnel narcotics to Europe, the proceeds of that trafficking fuel operations targeting the U.S. market. Second, the enormous sums of money made available by drug trafficking are a key source of corruption of

African law enforcement agencies, militaries, border guards, and politicians. This allows black markets in many forms of contraband to flourish, and diverts the capabilities of Africa's security sector away from ensuring public security. Third, drug-related corruption has led to new forms of dangerous elite political competition. For instance, in Guinea-Bissau in 2009, the president and military chief were assassinated on the same day in an apparent tit-for-tat struggle over control of a country that has been labeled Africa's first "narco-state."<sup>47</sup> Fourth, facilitation of the drug trade through Africa has bolstered the capabilities of both rebel groups and terrorist organizations on the continent. In Northern Mali, for instance, ethnic militias from the Tuareg and Berbiche tribes and, more recently, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb run protection rackets against drug traffickers. They receive financial payoffs that are critical to their guerrilla operations in exchange for escorting drug shipments or simply leaving the traffickers unmolested. Finally, drug trafficking has a negative impact on African countries' socioeconomic development. As traffickers increasingly pay their local counterparts "in product" rather than "in cash," local consumption of cocaine and other drugs is on the rise. The public health consequences—rising addiction rates, increased prevalence of HIV, and associated criminal violence and domestic abuse—are one element of this equation. Another problem comes in the form of economic distortions caused by windfall profits and money laundering, which have consequences ranging from unexplained inflation to currency appreciation that makes legitimate exports uncompetitive (the "Dutch disease").<sup>48</sup>

Similar dynamics are at work with piracy, illegal oil bunkering, and most of the other

threats detailed above. Crime and insecurity in the maritime domain interfere with open sea lines of communication, can limit global trade, and have damaged the global economy. Organized crime and rebellion, tied to corruption and governments' unwillingness to clamp down on smuggling, provide both criminals and terrorists with ready networks for weapons proliferation, illicit finance, and illegal movement of men and materiel for operations. While all of these affect international security and politics, the human face of Africa's irregular threats is more prosaic. African citizens are beset by all forms of criminal violence on a day-to-day basis, including robberies, assaults, carjackings, kidnappings, and sexual violence, with little recourse. Combined with the inability or unwillingness of African governments to provide for public security, the result of these threats has been labeled a "retreat from the state" by large segments of African societies. In this process, citizens opt to avoid direct contact with officials, and instead seek security and welfare in nonstatutory arrangements.<sup>49</sup>

This has generated a political and security void that is increasingly filled by urban gangs, highwaymen, and criminal networks that are able to rival, surpass, or co-opt local military and law enforcement capabilities. Many African communities have responded by forming or supporting their own armed gangs, vigilante groups, and self-defense units. Examples abound, including the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) in South Africa, the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria, shariah courts in Somalia, and the Mungiki and Taliban gangs in Kenya.<sup>50</sup> In the first instance, supporting these gangs often appears as a rational response to ensure a level of local security. However, these initiatives often develop

military, financial, and even political autonomy from the communities that originally supported their formation, and they devolve over time into something more sinister—protection rackets that prey on locals with impunity, tools of violent political competition between ethnic groups, or ideologically motivated sects that pursue power for themselves and their vision of a correct society. For instance, elements of PAGAD became radicalized to the point of launching a terrorist bombing attack at the Planet Hollywood restaurant in Cape Town in August 1998.

This shift toward the informal and illicit is reflected in the economic domain as well, leaving a substantial portion of the public without essential public services or employment. High poverty rates, extreme income inequality, a demographic youth bulge, and rapid urbanization provide no shortage of willing participants seeking their livelihoods through criminal activities. Furthermore, gangs and self-defense units can function as proto-militias that can drive future civil wars, while their illicit peacetime activities serve as the basis for future war economies.

### Emerging Consensus

In response to these challenges, the United States and other members of the international community have reached a consensus on required strategic responses. Under the overall rubric of security sector reform, the strategy emphasizes building African capabilities to confront these threats nationally and multilaterally, and with significant U.S. and European support. It includes efforts to professionalize African law enforcement, civilian intelligence, and border security agencies, as well as enhancing the continent's legal capabilities and improving national coordination and regional cooperation.

The problem faced by a majority of African governments is that they oversee a range of security forces—military, gendarmerie, police, and intelligence—that have been trained and equipped for a traditional set of missions. Since the end of colonialism, the most competent of Africa's security forces built significant capabilities for national defense against a foreign invasion that has never been likely to come. Moreover, some African leaders intentionally undermined the effectiveness of their own forces by relying on patronage networks, divide-and-rule tactics, praetorian guards, and private armies to provide security for ruling regimes.<sup>51</sup>

Security sector reform is now widely recognized as a fundamental requirement for governments to ensure that their security forces are designed, trained, equipped, and managed in new ways that allow them to address contemporary challenges that threaten public safety and security.<sup>52</sup> Over the past decade, peacekeeping capabilities have been built—either autonomously through Africa's own sub-regional deployments, through bilateral training efforts such as the U.S. Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program, or via multinational efforts including the current Africa Standby Force initiative. However, training and reform for domestic security operations have been far more limited. This requires balancing the traditional focus on militaries with efforts to develop the continent's police, intelligence, and gendarmerie/paramilitary forces. These initiatives must be suitable for tackling organized crime and protecting “homeland security” while adhering to the rule of law.

Law enforcement faces a particularly wide range of problems that limits its ability to effectively support African and international

security. Police in most countries remain poorly or irregularly paid, and often have little usable equipment. In addition to very poor ratios of police to population size, there is major bias in their deployment to large urban areas, with far less capability to operate in rural hinterlands. Africa's police forces continue to

while investments in military professionalism have generally reduced the military's role in politics, the continent's police forces are considered a front line of corruption and human rights abuse

face problems of ethnic-based recruitment that limit constructive relations with the community, are plagued by political appointments to top posts, and suffer from the proliferation of multiple, competing police services. Police forces serve only limited proactive or preventative functions, and remain focused on repressing general threats to public order. They have limited investigative capabilities, particularly in technical areas such as forensics. Finally, while investments in military professionalism have generally reduced the military's role in politics, the continent's police forces are considered a front line of corruption and human rights abuse.<sup>53</sup>

Police reform in Africa needs to take place at multiple levels to be effective. While better pay and working conditions, improved training in investigations and human rights standards, and the adoption of "community policing" approaches have been advocated for general police forces, these alone will not be sufficient. Additional efforts need to be directed at building and deploying in a

preventative manner the investigative capabilities of special branches, criminal investigation divisions, and key task forces formed to confront the threats of terrorism, trafficking, and crime. In these particularly sensitive and challenging areas, elite units will need to be formed with substantial external support, and must involve the most experienced and aggressive officers with an ability to fuse intelligence and lead tactical operations. Technical capabilities are also required, including strengthening the forensics capacities and signals intelligence capabilities of reliable African partners.

Enhancing the rule of law remains a critical component of security sector transformation. On the legal front, many African countries have faced significant problems prosecuting individuals arrested for crimes related to terrorism, drug smuggling, and organized crime. In many jurisdictions, where colonial-era legal codes have not been updated, key tools to combat these threats are unavailable to African prosecutors. In some cases, there are insufficient provisions to bring charges for criminal conspiracies or the aiding and abetting of criminals. In other cases, there is no opportunity to engage in plea bargaining to give leniency to low-level criminals in exchange for evidence against their superiors. Their limited ability to introduce evidence collected by national intelligence services into courts of law is another critical concern. To enhance and judicialize intelligence collection, there is a need to establish rules for how African governments can legally monitor and regulate sensitive institutions that have often been abused by criminals. This particularly includes religious institutions, charity organizations, remittance companies, and the banking sector. Development of financial



regulatory and monitoring capabilities, which can also be used to combat other financial crimes including corruption, money laundering, forgery, “419 scams,” and “land grabbing,” can make a serious contribution to good governance and democratization efforts.<sup>54</sup> Finally, for legal reform to work, it must extend from simply drafting new laws to developing a functioning judicial system that can apply the laws. This requires extending “rule of law” training to the judiciary, prosecutorial and corrections systems, and parliamentary and other civilian oversight bodies.

Political engagement and negotiations are also required for African security capabilities to extend into new domains, ethnically and geographically. On the one hand, security institutions will need to be increasingly multiethnic, reflecting the national demographic makeup of their countries. This may require political dialogue with and recruitment outreach to disenfranchised or antagonized communities that see national security forces as a threat to their interests and independence. Without such confidence-building and force integration, pressing public security forces into disputed “ungoverned areas” on the continent is a recipe for exacerbating existing tensions and possibly pushing local actors into the arms of criminal or terrorist groups. On the other hand, African security forces need to increase their capabilities to deploy in arid or forested rural environments far from urban centers over a prolonged time. Other homeland security functions will also need to be bolstered in a similar manner, including immigration, customs, and port security, to ensure that the continent’s borders are properly controlled.<sup>55</sup>

Traditional roles for military forces remain despite the need for increased focus on Africa’s

civilian security services. The job of military forces should be providing critical support that augments the capabilities of civilian security efforts, particularly in the areas of border security and leveraging military intelligence. Efforts to build security capacities to patrol the continent’s extensive land and sea borders will have positive effects for other areas of African security sector performance as well. For instance, the development of robust coast guard capabilities in the police, gendarmerie, and naval services may cross-fertilize with efforts to enhance African peacekeeping capacities, where maritime assets are often required for the lift and sustainment of forces, force protection, maritime interdiction for sanctions enforcement, and the protection and actual delivery of humanitarian assistance. Maritime capacity-building would also enhance African search-and-rescue capabilities.<sup>56</sup>

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Intelligence collection and analysis capabilities must be addressed as an additional challenge. First, by their very nature, the threats discussed above are difficult targets for both African and international security services to understand and disrupt. Intelligence collection focused on national and regional threats needs to be increased across the board. Second, as in militaries and police forces, intelligence services must diversify. Today they are often staffed by ethnic groups associated with dominant tribes and clans while terrorist

and criminal threats frequently emerge in areas peripheral to state interests and among ethnic groups that have been marginalized in national politics and civil service employment. In response, African intelligence services simply need to ensure that their pool of human resources is diversified in order to penetrate the illicit networks of other groups. Third, African governments should build new capabilities to

poverty, bad governance, and the resulting ease with which rebels or extremists can mobilize public discontent are the root causes of Africa's security predicament

leverage financial intelligence and open source reporting. In combination with extended surveillance coverage across Africa's maritime and air domains, the governments can then clamp down on transnational trafficking, commodity smuggling, and the illegal movement of persons, including both illegal immigration and terrorist foreign fighter flows.

National interagency coordination needs support by African governments. Domestic initiatives are required to eliminate stovepipes that hamper information-sharing and to initiate combined operations to confront multisectoral threats that go beyond the remit of any single ministry. Some countries have created dedicated national counterterrorism centers or "fusion centers" to collate intelligence and deconflict operational responses. Others have expanded participation in their senior-level national security councils to better integrate police, gendarmerie, military, intelligence, and border security efforts. These efforts need continued international encouragement and support as

governments attempt to overcome years of factionalism and bureaucratic rivalry within the continent's security systems.

Regional cooperation is the next step to confront the transnational challenge discussed above. Already, Africa-wide and subregional strategies have been developed by the UN, African Union, and regional economic communities. For instance, the African Union adopted a Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in 1999, followed by a Regional Action Plan in 2002. The latter stresses the importance of information- and intelligence-sharing, combined multinational operations, harmonized legislation, mutual legal assistance, and extradition arrangements. Similar "strategic systems" moving from global standards to local action plans already exist to confront small arms and light weapons proliferation, piracy, drug trafficking, and human smuggling and the trafficking of persons.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, working with INTERPOL, national police forces are increasing their cooperative efforts through a series of subregional organizations, such as the West African Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization and its sister organizations for the Eastern, Southern, and Central Africa subregions.

Addressing the root causes of Africa's internal threats is the only sustainable solution. Poverty leading to the rise of criminal livelihoods, bad governance leading to weak national security systems, and the resulting ease with which rebels or extremists can mobilize public discontent are the root causes of Africa's security predicament today. The rise of these threats is only partly due to the growing reach and sophistication of foreign terrorist and criminal actors. The other side of the story is that these groups have found

highly accommodating political and economic environments in which to operate, and African states often remain embedded in the very threats that the United States and other partners are asking them to confront.

## Conclusion

The consensus and initiatives presented above reflect U.S. strategy toward Africa, as detailed most recently in National Security Presidential Directive 50 (NSPD-50), signed by President George W. Bush in September 2006.<sup>58</sup> It commits U.S. policymakers to consolidate democratic transitions on the continent, bolster fragile states, strengthen regional organizations, promote regional security, stimulate African economic development and growth, and provide humanitarian and development assistance. Despite the change in U.S. administrations since NSPD-50 was adopted, there is no indication of a substantial shift away from these goals under President Barack Obama.<sup>59</sup> With the creation of U.S. Africa Command to oversee defense programs on the continent and encourage “whole-of-government” cooperation, U.S. strategy should be viewed through the prism of coordinated diplomatic, defense, and development responses to create and strengthen African capacity.<sup>60</sup>

Already, through programs such as the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership, East Africa Regional Strategic Initiative, and Africa Partnership Station, as well as inter-agency efforts led by the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Treasury Department, the United States is investing heavily in building African capacities along the lines of strategies adopted by the

United Nations, African Union, and European partners under the banner of promoting “African solutions for African problems.”

However, strategic planning and capacity-building are only two pieces of the puzzle in combating Africa’s irregular threats. The more difficult part is motivating African leaders and hardening their political will to manage and utilize their security sector capabilities to best effect. Despite the existence of excellent UN, African Union, and subregional frameworks to confront these threats, there has been a notable lack of national-level action by member states, where political will is often weak or short-lived. The United States and other foreign partners will need to increase diplomatic pressure on African leaders to live up to their commitments. Provision of additional security assistance should be conditional on improved performance, but effective operations and significant reforms should continue to be highlighted by U.S. officials in speeches, reports, and high-level visits.

Where African actions are limited by continued problems of the competence and capacity of security forces, consideration needs to be given to the formation of “vetted units” of elite, well-trained soldiers and law enforcement officers who operate under the oversight (if not directly under the command) of foreign partners to protect sensitive intelligence and prevent corruption and politicization of national forces by their criminal opponents. Embedding U.S. or other foreign military and intelligence advisors and mentors within African counterterrorism, counternarcotics, or other units provides an opportunity to maintain presence and pressure leaders to take actions at the operational level without compromising African governments’ sovereign control of their forces.

Relying solely on African leaders who choose to ignore or may be implicated in criminal and smuggling activities would be naïve. In some instances, Washington and other foreign governments will need to apply significant pressure on African leaders to take action. To this end, there are a number of new and innovative tools to motivate those leaders who are deemed recalcitrant. For instance, the Department of State has the ability under mechanisms such as the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act and Presidential Proclamation 7750 to impose criminal penalties, economic sanctions, or bans on entry into the United States for individuals (and their businesses) believed to play a significant role in narcotics trafficking.

UN investigations, possibly led by a “panel of experts” associated with the Security Council’s Sanctions Committee, are another potential tool. This could result in UN Security Council resolutions that oblige other countries to bar the entry of designated officials, or the freezing or seizure of foreign assets. Some analysts have already proposed that such investigations require the creation of “special courts” composed of regional and international investigators and jurists to lead prosecution of cases in sensitive areas, such as counternarcotics, which often involve official corruption.<sup>61</sup> Finally, increased unilateral action outside Africa’s borders—for instance, further U.S.-European air and sea interdiction efforts in the Atlantic Ocean area—could be used to curtail illicit activities that transit those borders, even without assistance from African governments.

Africa, the United States, and other international partners will be best served by adopting a three-pronged strategy to effectively respond to irregular threats in Africa. First, long-term support should be expanded for building modern

and effective state institutions that are capable of protecting their own borders and confronting violations of domestic law that could have regional and global consequences. Second, further efforts—including the use of sticks as well as carrots—are required to strengthen the political will of African leaders to actually deploy their evolving security sector capabilities in an aggressive manner that abides by the rule of law. Third, the United States and other foreign partners will need to deploy a growing number of their own intelligence, law enforcement, and military personnel to Africa to address terrorist and criminal dynamics that pose direct and immediate threats to the U.S. homeland.

There is nothing to prevent increased African, U.S., and international commitment to thwart the continent’s irregular, nonstate security threats. However, from a strategic perspective, the United States and other nations should only make this sort of commitment with their eyes wide open. This means understanding the complexity and durability of the problems, the limitations that African states confront in building their own capabilities and the political will to confront those problems, and the enormous resources (human, financial, and political) that will be required to be successful. Without such an understanding, U.S. and other security assistance providers will not only be frustrated in achieving their goals, but their investments in Africa may actually reward those who allow violence, predation, and plundering to continue. **PRISM**

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## Notes

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